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SEYMOUR HADEN

PAINTER-ETCHER



BY

FREDERICK KEPPEL



Being a condensation of the lecture
prepared for and delivered before
the Grolier Club, and afterward re-
peated at the Metropolitan Museum
of Art, Yale University, etc., etc.



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THE time is happily past when “an etching” was supposed to be a drawing done with pen and ink, and when a collector exhibiting some fine proof was liable to have the unmeaning question put to him: “Now, is this *the* original?”—as if there were only one. People now know what an etching is and how it is made, they know that a painter-etching is one designed as well as executed by its author, and knowing all this they understand why of all forms of art-expression painter-etching is the most personal and the most intellectual. The time is also past when an etching was vaguely believed to be an alleged work of art, of mysterious and obscure significance, “to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness.” We now know that there is no mystery about it, and that what to an educated eye looks right and true is right and true, while what looks wrong and false is wrong and false.

To the superficial and unsympathetic observer an etching may appear a very simple and trifling thing, but in reality it is a most difficult thing to produce worthily. We have, alas, too many etchings — such as they are — but the world has never had enough really fine ones. Master-etchers of the first rank are and always have been very few indeed, and the master does not always rise to the height of a masterpiece. The masterpiece in art must be perfect, and perfect from every point of view : it must embody a noble scheme nobly expressed, and above all it must be entirely original and entirely personal to the artist who creates it.

These things being so, the genuine master in etching would simply be stupid if he were devoid of a proper sense of his own importance. Rembrandt must have known that he was a very great man ; Van Dyck was the associate of kings and nobles ; the unhappy Frenchman, Méryon, while slowly going mad from neglect and absolute hunger, yet indignantly spurned every aid that looked like charity ; Whistler, through evil report and good report, has always insisted upon the dignity of the artist. This he never forgets even while wagging his “never-ending, still-beginning” fights and quarrels.



Kensington Gardens. (The Small Plate.)

This noble respect of the artist for his art was once quaintly illustrated by the great singer Malibran: Having traveled to St. Petersburg, the Empress Catherine the Great asked her to name her price for a series of operatic performances there; and, astonished at what she considered the exorbitant demands of the artiste, the Empress exclaimed, “Why, that is more than I pay the major-generals of my army!” to which the artiste made answer, “Your Majesty should make your major-generals sing for you!”

Probably no artist—certainly no etcher—has vindicated his art with so much intellectual power, such convincing authority and such success as has Sir Seymour Haden. I speak now not of his etchings but of his published writings and of his leadership in the revival of painter-etching.

It is curious how the impetus toward some public movement seems to be generated almost simultaneously in the minds of several men, often residing far apart and holding no communication with each other. It was so with this interesting revival. Seymour Haden was by no means the only etcher or the only writer; but he stands alone in this: that he combined in himself the double *rôle* of etcher

and writer of the first rank. To these we must add still another qualification : he is by nature a man of affairs, a leader of men—and a leader of artists—which I take to be a very rare qualification indeed!

He found painter-etching almost forgotten and unknown,—a vague tradition of the seventeenth century,—and it is in a great measure due to this strong and earnest man that in his own country the Association of Painter-Etchers has been raised, by decree of the Sovereign, to the dignity of a British Royal Society — the equal in rank of such a national institution as the Royal Academy of Arts.

In the year 1768 the Royal Academy was founded. The painter, Joshua Reynolds, became its first president, and King George III created him Sir Joshua Reynolds; and in 1894 Queen Victoria conferred the same title of knighthood on Seymour Haden: founder and first president of the Royal Society of Painter-Etchers.

Seymour Haden was born at number 62 Sloane Street, London, on September 16, 1818. His father was an eminent physician, and the artist afterwards practised surgery for many years in the house where he was born. He was educated at University College, London,



Egham Lock.

and spent some time in Italy. As a young man he filled the office of *prosecteur* (or an-atomist) at the military hospital at Grenoble, France.

In a recent conversation Sir Seymour Haden said to me: “I have never been a reading man — I mean that very little of what I may know has been acquired through reading. My aim through life has always been to be an observer, an investigator, an original thinker — always with some definite aim and with some progressive purpose.”

On another occasion, when he was speaking of his passion for salmon and trout fishing, I said to him that for my own part my sympathies were always with the fish, that I was glad when they got away, and that I never could understand why men of eminent mental force (such as several Presidents of the United States) could find pleasure in angling, a sport which to me seemed idle and empty. I even ventured to fortify my own opinion by quoting Dr. Johnson’s famous definition of the angler’s implement, “A long rod and line, with a fly at one end and a fool at the other.” But to this he made answer: “You are altogether wrong, and if, as you say, angling has a peculiar charm for men of powerful and active intellect, it is

because it calls into play all the powers of observation.”

These details may indicate that, in whatever he has done, Sir Seymour could be nothing if not original. In Addison’s “*Spectator*” there is a passage to the effect that every good man has a hobby, while the bad supply its place with a vice; and it sometimes happens that a man’s hobby proves to be the most valuable part of his life-work. It was so with Seymour Haden, and his hobby was etching.

Instances are not rare of men who, having utterly failed in one career, have afterwards succeeded in another totally different. But for a busy surgeon first to achieve eminence in his own exacting profession, and then, comparatively late in life, to take up painter-etching, the most difficult of all the graphic arts, and in it to produce work which ranks him throughout Europe and America as the greatest living landscape-etcher, is only another proof that genius is not tied down by ordinary limitations, that where it exists it will assert itself triumphantly; and that the artist, like the poet, is “born, not made.”

“How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?” is the question recorded in the gospel; but though Seymour Haden, fortu-



A Water Meadow.

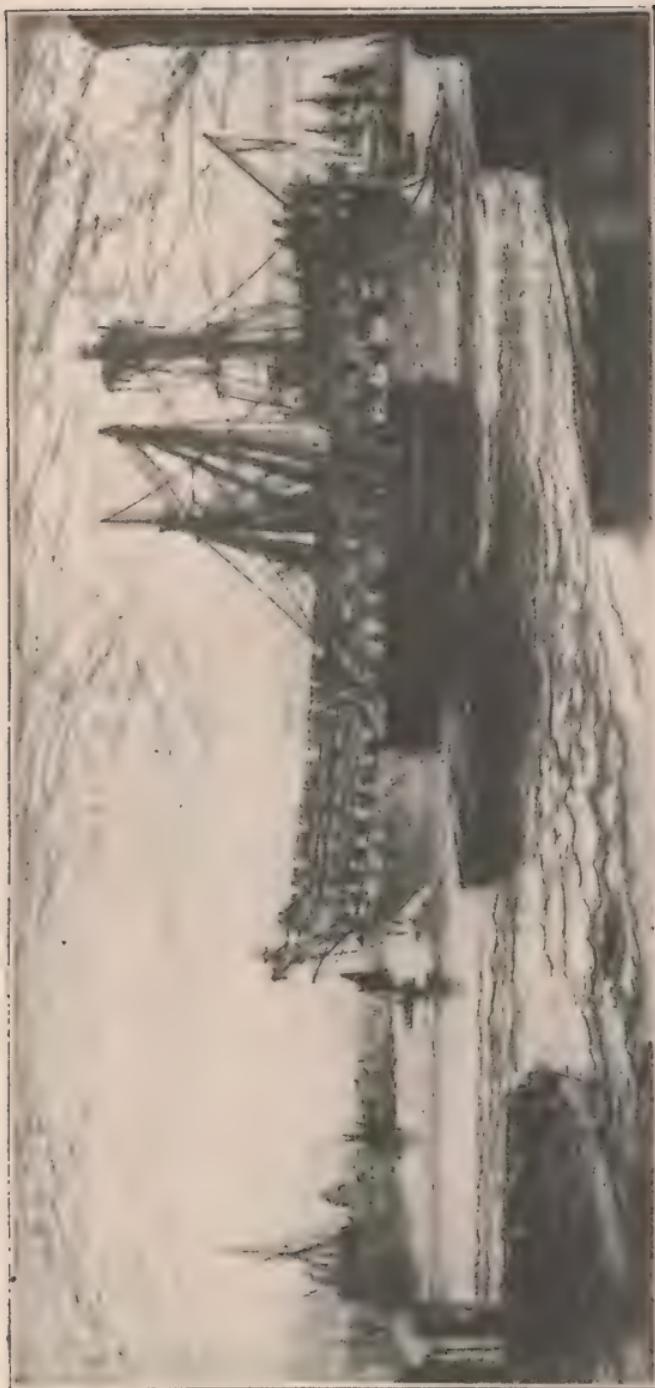
nately, was never taught art in the schools, yet anyone who supposes that he is not a most thoroughly trained artist makes a very great mistake. No artist's work is further removed from being what is called "amateurish."

Perhaps the highest attainment in every art is a certain noble and learned simplicity — never to be mistaken for the awkward simplicity of ignorance. A French critic says that no one does a thing thoroughly well unless he does it with ease. The "art which conceals art" — which can hide all evidences of effort — is a very high attainment.

Seymour Haden's work is instinct with this masterly quality. It is full of what he himself calls "the labor of omission." Of etching as compared with painting, he writes: "The painter, by overlaying his work, may modify and correct it as he goes on. Not so the etcher. Every stroke he makes must tell strongly against him if it be bad, or prove him a master if it be good. In no branch of art does a touch go for so much. The necessity for a rigid selection is therefore constantly present in his mind. If one stroke in the right place tells more for him than ten in the wrong, it would seem to follow that that single stroke is a more learned stroke than the ten by which he would have arrived

at his end." "The faculty of doing such work supposes a concentration and a reticence requisite in no other art." And he goes on to say that, for these reasons, etching, of all arts, is the least suited to the half-educated artist. We have all, alas, seen too many demonstrations of the truth of this! I confess that in thus quoting from Seymour Haden's writings, I am putting my own efforts at a great disadvantage. The quotation stands out like the new patch in the old garment.

Admitting that Seymour Haden was a born artist, richly endowed with the creative faculty, how was it that he also became the superb technician that he is? This did not come to him by nature — nor does it come to anyone. It came to him through long, hard, earnest study and practice. He studied the best models — Rembrandt's etchings above all. He was never afraid to pay the necessary price for a faultless proof by Rembrandt. But even before he began to form his unsurpassed collection of the old masterpieces it was his custom to borrow a portfolio of such etchings from a London dealer whom I myself remember as a very old man, Mr. Love, of Bunhill Row, and carrying home such treasures he would sit up at night with them — not only delighting in their beauty,



The Breaking up of the Agamemnon.

as other amateurs do, but also studying and analyzing the method and technic of each master. Then, after long practice in drawing, and with an intimate technical knowledge of the recognized masterpieces of etching, he himself began to etch.

Thereafter his hard-earned holidays in the country were devoted to etching the beautiful English landscape. These plates were etched out of doors, on the spot, and generally at a single sitting.

If he had been one of the regular makers of pictures for sale, he would have first ascertained what sort of pictures the public were buying, and would then have tried to produce something to suit the market. Or else, knowing that the works of some artists were popular, he would have made an imitation of them. But, happily for art, every one of Seymour Haden's etchings, from first to last, was done in his own way, solely to please himself, and (except in the case of a very few of his later plates) with no view whatever to publicity or sale.

Indeed, he was thus producing masterpieces for nearly twenty years, when, at the instance of a few enlightened amateurs on the Continent of Europe, he finally consented, in 1865, to the publication of a selection of twenty-five of his plates.

These were published in Paris; for it was supposed that in England nobody would understand them. But when France set the example England eagerly followed, and the whole edition was very soon sold.

But notwithstanding this, in England thirty years ago taste in art was in a very sad condition generally. A picture, to please the public, had to be of a formal, prim, "goody-goody" character, and was expected to tell some sort of a pretty little story. The nobler attributes of art—the imaginative, the suggestive, the really artistic qualities—were generally ignored. He who could most slavishly imitate the external form and texture of an object was the best artist. The great John Ruskin had nothing better to say of etching than that it was "a blundering art"; and I well remember an elderly English painter saying to me, when denouncing the French school and all its works: "Even their very landscapes are immoral!" But, as General Grant once said, "a bad law is sure to work its own cure"; and the impulse toward a freer, more suggestive, more intellectual art came to England and to America mainly from France—and the French got it from such masters as Rembrandt. And yet it was at this very discouraging time that Seymour



A Brig at Anchor.

Haden and Whistler were producing those etchings that all the world now accepts as masterpieces. The earlier proofs of them only got into circulation through being given away by the artists ; for at that time nobody would dream of *buying* a contemporary etching.

Truly the ancient Israelites were not the only people who first stoned their prophets and afterwards built sepulchres in their honor ; and Whistler—a man who conciliates nobody—most pungently says to the critics who now lavish their praise on his London etchings of nearly forty years ago : “If they are so good now, why were they not also good when you first saw them ?”

And now, ladies and gentlemen, I will conclude with a criticism on my own lecture !

It is that I may have said too much about Seymour Haden the man, and not enough about Seymour Haden the artist. As to his art, wiser heads than mine have expounded it and will go on expounding it in the time to come ; and I am only one of the many who believe that these etchings of his are to be included in the permanently great art work of our century.

But for my own part, if I speak of him at all, I must speak as I feel, and I cannot make my words impersonal and abstract ; and (to quote

what Shakespeare makes Mark Antony say of his friend Julius Cæsar):

“ That they know full well
That gave me public leave to speak of him.”

It is because I have known Seymour Haden long and well, and because there is no man living for whom I have a greater regard or a higher esteem.

FREDERICK KEPPEL.



NOTE.—Visitors will be welcome at all times to call and examine Messrs. FREDERICK KEPPEL & Co.’s collection of Seymour Haden’s Etchings.



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